

**FOR TEACHERS**

# **A BRIEF HISTORY OF ST. MARY'S CITY**



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# Pre-Contact:

Long before the first European settlers set foot on the soil of what is now Maryland, the land had been inhabited for thousands of years by various Native American groups. The Yaocomaco people – a small native community – were settled in the area of St. Mary's City, and their village extended to the Virginia shore, with the St. Mary's River and its tributaries acting as a roadway for their dugout canoes. The Yaocomaco interacted with other larger tribal groups, such as the Piscataway and Powhatan Chiefdoms, making up an intricate political, social, and cultural system. Like these other groups, the Yaocomaco spoke a dialect of the Eastern Algonquian language and shared many elements of a common culture with other Eastern Woodland Indians in the Atlantic coastal region.

The Yaocomaco were semi-sedentary people, meaning that their houses – or witchotts – were of a more permanent construction and they practiced some agriculture, but they also relied on hunting, fishing, and gathering, and would migrate seasonally to locations that held necessary resources. The Yaocomaco used the resources of their natural environment to survive. They knapped stone tools; made tools out of bones from animals they hunted; made cordage from plant fiber, bark, and animal sinew; used fire to fell trees and for making their dugout canoes; made pottery from local clay; and tanned hides for clothing.

The Yaocomaco, like other tribal groups in the region, had a leader called a werowance (where-o-wans), and a council of tribal advisors called wisoes (wee-sews). Village chiefs would answer to tribal chiefs, who, in turn, would report to paramount chiefs. Paramount chiefs ruled over a confederation or chiefdom of tribes – such as the Piscataway Chiefdom – and would have the title of tayac (tie-yac). The tayac would provide guidance and protection to

tribes of the chiefdom, in exchange for support and gifts of food and material goods.

Spiritual and social gatherings were held to celebrate the major events of tribal and village life – as well as various seasonal activities – through feasting, dancing, and music. The community would have very likely joined together to build structures, clear fields, and perform large-scale tasks. Responsibility for tasks seems to have been divided between the sexes. Women generally maintained and managed the witchotts and household fields; took care of children; foraged for and prepared food; and made mats, pots, baskets, and clothing. Men were generally responsible for protecting the tribe, making tools, grinding and knapping stone, making dugout canoes, and making fish nets.

Leading up to the arrival of the Europeans, the Yaocomaco suffered heavily from raids by Susquehannock war parties from the north. As a result, the Yaocomaco, and other Native American groups in the region, welcomed the English because of a need for allies and protection.

# Arrival of the Europeans:

In the late 1500s and early 1600s, England began efforts to develop an empire in North America. At first, colonization was financed by entrepreneurs, including joint stock companies and individual proprietors. In 1632, the English king, Charles I, granted what is now the state of Maryland to Cecil Calvert, the second Baron of Baltimore, and named it in honor of his wife, Henrietta Maria.

The king expected that as proprietor, Lord Baltimore would send colonists to develop the province into a profitable operation that would bring new trade to England, and profit to the Calvert family. Lord Baltimore was to be the ruler of this land, but his charter required that he make laws only with the consent of the freemen of the colony or their deputies. The charter offered a powerful protection for his colonists. As part of the agreement, Lord Baltimore, not the king, was permitted to grant all of the land within the colony, and until late in the 17th century (1681), he granted rights to land in return for the transportation of colonists. Lord Baltimore gave the first investors rights to 2,000 acres for every five men, or 100 acres per person for fewer than five. Later, these grants were reduced to 50-acre rights per person brought to Maryland. The land was not free<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>people had to pay fees for their surveys and patents, as well as a small rent to the proprietor. However, the land was cheap.

Lord Baltimore wanted his colonists to build and live in towns. For every person transported, he offered rights to ten acres of town land on the fields where his colonists first settled. At ten acres per person transported, town land grants ranged from 30 to 400 acres. The colony's leaders all held town land properties, and though there was no real city, the town lands<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>an area of about 1,200 acre - became the seat of government. Early courts and

assemblies met in Governor Leonard Calvert's house and at the house of John Lewger, the provincial secretary.

There was no town at St. Mary's until the 1660s. By then, the Maryland population was large enough and spread out enough to require more than the private houses of leaders to conduct public business and accommodate visitors who came there for public purposes. In 1668, to encourage development, Lord Baltimore chartered St. Mary's City.

Lord Baltimore was a Catholic and his plan was for Maryland to be a place where people of different religions could live together peacefully. In England, Catholics could not worship in public or hold public office. Catholic priests were supposedly banned from England, although a few were able to live as members of private households and conduct mass in Catholic homes. In Maryland, Lord Baltimore proposed that Catholics could worship openly and, when otherwise qualified, participate in political life.

Initially, Lord Baltimore's investors and leaders, the people who paid the way of the other colonists, were Catholic. From the start, people of other religions were encouraged to come to Maryland with a promise that their beliefs would be tolerated. This practice was made into law in 1649 with An Act Concerning Religion. The law was limited - providing toleration only for Christians—but it was the first statement of religious toleration in America. Ultimately, the great majority of people coming to Maryland were Protestants, mostly poor indentured servants, who would work in the colony in exchange for their passage.

Father Andrew White, one of the Jesuit priests who came on the first expedition, wrote a narrative of the voyage and the founding, which provides historians with a glimpse into the earliest days of the Maryland colony. The ships that brought the first colonists, Ark and Dove, sailed from London in October 1633, but Lord Baltimore's enemies had the ships stopped, charging that the passengers had not taken an oath of allegiance to the king. Counting the number of oaths taken, it is evident that at that point 128 colonists were aboard. The ships went on to the Isle of Wight, where the Jesuits and probably some or all of the Catholic leaders joined the other colonists, bringing the total to about 140 people.

In November of 1633, Ark and Dove set sail for Maryland. Father White described terrible storms that separated the two ships. Eventually, both ships made it safely to the West Indies, where they re-supplied with food and then sailed for the Chesapeake, arriving in late February in Jamestown, Virginia. Early in March, the colonists sailed north to the Potomac and up the river to St. Clement's Island. Governor Leonard Calvert took the Dove further up the river to a village of Piscataway Indians and asked permission to settle in the area. The Piscataway were somewhat suspicious, but a Virginia fur trader, Captain Henry Fleet, helped reassure them. The Tayac possibly thought that European allies would be useful against the Susquehannock, who had been attacking local tribes in their confederation, and, therefore, gave Governor Calvert permission to settle wherever he wished.

Captain Fleet brought Governor Calvert to a site on the St. Mary's River where the English first came in contact with the Yaocomaco people. The Yaocomaco had already cleared land, but were preparing to leave (possibly due to

hostilities inflicted by the Susquehannock). Cleared land, fertile and ready for crops, was what the new settlement needed. Although some of the Yaocomaco had already left, it was agreed that, within a year, those remaining would leave the village to the colonists. In exchange, the English presented metal hoes, axes, and cloth to the Yaocomaco. The land was claimed in the name of King Charles I and Lord Baltimore and was called Saint Maries in honor of the Virgin Mary.

Upon settlement, Governor Calvert immediately erected a fort. It was described as being palisaded, about 360 feet square, and protected by cannon which the colonists had brought with them to Maryland. However, no hostilities appeared, making the fort unnecessary. The colonists lived in and near it for a while, but within three years, perhaps sooner, the leaders began to take up the lands promised them and move their servants to distant plantations. By the early 1640s, the fort was in decay.

The survival of the colony was the first order of business, but the Maryland colonists could not raise the grain crops they had known in England because these crops required plowing and complete clearance of the land. Clearing virgin forests proved too time-consuming. Rather, the colonists borrowed agricultural practices from the Yaocomaco and Piscataway such as girdling trees. This process meant removing a piece of bark from all around the tree so that the sap could not rise, causing the tree to lose its leaves and die. Without the leaves to shade the ground, sunlight could reach the plants, and crops could be grown. Colonists also adopted the practice of making hills in which corn could be planted for food, and tobacco could be planted for export, rather than plowing fields as was done back in England. To the English, corn was a miracle crop, bringing a minimum of 200 kernels in return

for each seed that germinated. Planting Indian corn rather than wheat or other English grains could produce twice as much food per acre.

Indentured servants and ex-servants were the backbone of the 17th-century labor force. Seventy to eighty-five percent of the immigrants to Maryland came as indentured servants. An indentured servant was a person who typically chose to enter into a contract in which their transportation to Maryland or other colonies was paid for by another person. The indentured servant repaid this debt by working for a set number of years. The terms of service depended on a variety of things. Indentures typically lasted for five to seven years. However, a child would be indentured until they became an adult, therefore remaining in indenture for a much longer period of time. Inversely, if a person possessed certain skills, they could negotiate a contract for just 2-4 years. Once free, these former indentured servants worked to become landowners and importers of servants themselves.

Many former indentured servants became landowners, but many others died before achieving this goal. Life expectancy of all immigrants was extraordinarily low; often one in five new arrivals died within the first year of arrival. This is because they had no immunity to various diseases and the added effects of a new climate; this is often referred to as the seasoning. Malaria was particularly widespread. Ironically, Europeans brought the disease with them and infected the local mosquitoes, which are the vector for spreading the disease. Malaria was not often fatal, but it weakened a person's immune system, making him/her more susceptible to other diseases such as influenza and dysentery.

In addition to indentured servitude, slavery was another form of labor that existed in Maryland in the 1600s. Slavery was a form of labor that, unlike an



indenture, was forced on an individual. Slavery has existed throughout human history and was practiced in the Middle East, North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, in the New World, and in the Iberian Peninsula. However, the cruel chattel slavery, that we are familiar with today, was different than these other forms of slavery and had its roots in the 1600s. The English were familiar with how the Spanish and Portuguese enslaved native peoples in their respective colonies; however, they could not emulate it to the same extent because the English needed to rely on good diplomatic relations with neighboring tribes. This still did not prevent some native people from being enslaved. Importation of enslaved Africans began within the first decade of the establishment of the Maryland colony, but due to the cost relative to that of an indentured servant, the numbers of enslaved Africans remained low for the first half of the century. As the dependence upon indentured labor was replaced by that of enslaved labor, more laws were passed to set out the foundations of the institution of chattel slavery. In 1664, a law passed by the colonial legislature made slavery into a race-based system in which Africans or people of African descent were enslaved for life and passed that status to their children. Laws passed in the 1660s and 1670s further dehumanized the enslaved population, and by the mid-1700s almost all bound laborers in St. Mary's County were enslaved. This remained true until the American Civil War brought an end to American slavery.

Today, everything that once stood on the 17th-century town lands has disappeared - at least above ground. St. Mary's City was abandoned for the present Maryland capital of Annapolis in 1695. Fortunately, there was very little later development to destroy the site of what was once the first capital of Maryland. Archaeologists are slowly uncovering the 17th-century remains of buildings, their contents, and the belongings of the people who once lived there.

# How do we know about the history of St. Mary's City?

Historians interpret the past based in part on the evidence that survives from a particular time period or is associated with a particular person or event. Historians call this evidence primary source material. Historic St. Mary's City bases its interpretive programs and exhibits on the information that survives directly from the early years of the colony, as well as information that survives about life in other English colonies, England, and Europe. Some of the primary sources that provide clues about Maryland in the 1600s are:

**Written documents** that include government, business, and church records, diaries, journals, letters, and some maps. Only a few documents have survived which provide researchers at Historic St. Mary's City with information about the earliest days of the colony. Some written accounts of life in colonial Maryland can be interpreted as promotional pitches or otherwise self-serving accounts for the benefit of investors or religious leaders in Europe, and their content must be examined with care.

In the 1600s, people conducted nearly all of the affairs of daily life by word of mouth. Only one in ten people - usually men - could read and/or write. As people struggled to survive, very few had the time or ability to write detailed descriptions of their houses, their belongings, or their daily activities. Inventories taken at the time of a man's death have become good sources of information about what particular people owned, but inventories from Maryland's early colonial period survive for only a small portion of the population. Although legal records can provide useful information, if a person had little or no business with the courts, he/she could pass through life with very little in the way of a paper trail.

Native Americans had no written language so there are no records or first-hand accounts that survive directly from their culture. Much of what is known about them comes from written accounts of English colonists such as Father Andrew White of Maryland and John Smith of Virginia. This evidence naturally reflects a European bias and is typically ethnocentric and androcentric (from a male perspective) in nature. Outsiders (Europeans) may not have been permitted to see or take part in certain native practices such as spiritual matters, medicinal and burial customs, so few descriptions of these activities exist.

**Drawings or paintings** that were done at the time of an event or by a person who was present at a particular place are often considered primary sources. Since much of daily English culture and customs was transplanted to the New World, paintings done in England and Europe also provide clues about how people in Maryland might have lived. However, most of those paintings were done of and for the wealthy and do not always provide information about the middle and lower classes.

In the 1580s, John White painted several watercolors of native peoples living in the Roanoke area (an area that would eventually become North Carolina). These watercolors were translated into engravings by Theodor de Bry. When combined with written, descriptive accounts by the English colonists, White's images provide many clues about the Indians of the mid-Atlantic coastal regions.

**Artifacts** are objects produced or shaped by humans that provide clues about the past. Artifacts often survive either as items passed down from one generation to the next, or are retrieved by archaeologists through excavation. Archaeologists can also interpret changes in soil color, such as stains left by wooden posts, building foundations, or through other human activities, to retrieve evidence of past peoples. Archaeologists who work at Historic St. Mary's City often combine the evidence they find with surviving written records to draw conclusions about life in early Maryland.

**Features** are evidence of human activity on the landscape. This can be something like where a fire discolored soil, or the remains of postholes. Postholes are places where humans dug a hole and put a post in it to build a witchott, house, or fence depending on the culture and intended use. The general public may not be familiar with features as they are with artifacts but both are very important for understanding past human behavior and actions.